

Juniors being specially gifted with musical talent, and Scale How re-echoes from morning till night with melodious strains or the reverse. Our physical foes, in the shape of chilblains and vaccination have assaulted us with terrible vigour. There have been no fatalities from these causes, the inconvenience was felt chiefly by the Sergeant when three students and no musician presented themselves for drill. Could some one inform us if the S.K. board is in league with the P.N.E.U. authorities to prevent an incursion of students to London in May, for again, whilst we are groaning under Botany and Hygiene, and trying to cut our fingers off with Sloyd knives, you will be indulging in lectures, conversaziones, and, above all, Scale How Gossip.

With apologies for the hastiness of this epistle

From the

PRESENT STUDENTS.

A HAPPY CHRISTMAS AMONG CHILDREN

(BEING AN ACCOUNT OF A MONTH SPENT AS A HOLIDAY MOTHER
AT ONE OF DR. BARNARDO'S COTTAGE HOMES).

JUST beyond the long shadows of London in the county of Essex lies the little village whither led my way on a cold evening of last December. A village without streets, or shops, yet with over a thousand inhabitants; a village echoing the sounds of many childish voices but which registers no births, a little community whose members are bound by ties of love and interdependence to one another, yet where few remember their fathers' voices or the touch of their mothers' hands upon their hair.

Then, as the people on the London platform struggled for their places in the overcrowded train, and later when with whistlings and shoutings the mighty engine carried us past innumerable factory chimneys, looking out upon these, I longed for the sight of the country that lay beyond and for the coming of the green fields.

And I wondered in my heart how many little children had been borne along this road towards those fields which they were soon to know but never yet had known. Children who had themselves been gathered up even as men gather treasures that others have despised from the ash heaps of the factories and the waste products of the workshops.

Cast forth by the great city, because (poor little waifs!) they, knowing nothing of the mighty laws of competition, and the stern mandate that only the fittest must survive, were themselves the very embodiment of the breach of the unalterable laws of political economy. For they were part of a surplus supply meeting no existent demand but demanding, even as the very breath of their life, stores of love and tenderness, and pity for their childish helplessness of which the city has no supplies for such as they.

Oh little waifs! Who can pause in the promoting of companies to create for you a family? Who can stay in the press of legislative business to teach you the law of love? Who can stoop from the contemplation of art and beauty to raise you up and show you the good things that have been prepared for you also?

"Oh, little feet! that such long years
Must wander on through hopes and fears;
Must ache and bleed beneath your load;
I, nearer to the Wayside Inn
Where toil shall cease and rest begin,
Am weary, thinking of your road."

But the train snorts and stops with a jerk, and soon the three mile drive is over and I stand before the great gates, within which, perhaps, I shall learn some answer to the pitiful problem of the children. The gateway leads into the "village," I can see the green grass plots and the dove-cote in the centre. I can make out two or three large buildings and many cottages, but I see all through a veil for already the tall spire of the red-roofed village church is pointing to a dark sky sequined with many stars.

But even in the gathering darkness the village looks peaceful and homelike. It is "home" in the real sense, not merely a home for over a thousand girls, all of whom have been at some time in their short lives absolutely destitute, having the workhouse before them at the best and at the worst such misery that to think of it makes a numb pain at the heart.

The pretty villa cottages, detached, and each with a tiny garden, stand about the grounds. Each shelters a family of girls, twelve to sixteen in number and about five to sixteen in age. They have a "mother" to care for them, and it is during the absence of their mother that I am to be "holiday mother" to sixteen children, and mistress for a few weeks of "Heather Cottage." After a thorough initiation into my new duties I am left to my own resources and I explore my little domain.

The two large living rooms,—play-room and dining-room—kept look bright and cheerful as I enter. The bare boards are snowy and smooth by daily scrubbing and now in this evening hour the children are seated in a semicircle round the fire. Some thrifty little Marthas are darning their stockings, some are nursing their dolls and wasting the wealth of motherly tenderness of which the hearts of little girls are always full to overflowing on their insensate waxen or composition forms, but all are singing as they work or play, and starting and re-starting with one accord on snatches of melody, songs learned at school sometimes and sometimes carols learned by those who are happy enough to be in the village choir.

When I have visited the four dormitories, each with its four little white beds, and inspected the store cupboard, taking heed for what my children shall eat on the morrow, and when I have jangled my household keys with a pleasing sense of proprietorship I find myself drawn towards the semicircle and beginning to make friends. Dark eyes and blue eyes look at me wistfully at first but their shyness soon wears off. In twenty minutes the ice is broken and we are discussing plans for Christmas together, for the great day will soon be here and no trouble or thought must be spared to make it a success. The eyes of the children grow brighter and brighter, sometimes they all speak at once and then again there is a breathless pause of excitement. Little lame Nellie has clambered on to my knees and enthroned herself contentedly there, and Catharine's cheeks glow with excitement while Joyce describes with more rhetoric than lucidity her scheme for the decoration of the play-room. Some can remember last Christmas and many before it in the village while others have not yet known what a really homelike Christmas may be, and others again have a faint and sweet recollection of what once was in their old home "before father was killed on the railway

and mother had to go to the hospital."

But bed-time soon comes, for we rise early in Heather Cottage. I put the little ones into bed after vigorous tubbings and then send the elder girls in turn, and I am not sorry when my own time comes at last.

Next morning at half-past five I am standing in the dormitory, but I am so sleepy myself that I have hardly the heart to rouse the "big" girls (big by comparison only), who should be rising now in the sunless early morning. But I harden my heart, as needs I must, knowing that Cissie must light her fires to warm the little ones' hands when they come *down, and that Joyce must lift her heavy head from its resting place on her arm and busy herself like a faithful little housewife in preparing the porridge for the children's breakfast.

And oh! how often I have to harden my heart in the course of the morning, for there is so much to be done and if one neglects a duty another suffers by it. The children are very good but they are only children and Discipline and method, and order, does not come more easily to them than to us at their age or older. Cissie lays the fire with thirty sticks, and an erection on top of them which seems constructed expressly to withstand flames, and I must unmake it before her and show her how to do it properly though her wistful hazel eyes seem to half reproach me with the thought that Cissie is only a little girl after all and that I could not have laid a fire when my years like Cissie's numbered twelve.

But after the early dinner which I prepare in the centre of a group who are learning, marking and conning by heart every movement, the hard work of the day is over and no more fault-finding is necessary. After all there has not been much of it before, but when every "don't" has to be multiplied by sixteen the total number seems large.

But now has come the real "children's hours." Such long walks we take adown the country lanes and such happy faces listen at the story-telling which we have instituted at tea-time. For the children are away from school for their holidays and so their voices cease not for one fleeting moment in the livelong day. All day long I hear them even as the voices of the young birds in spring and all day long they call me and ply me with the thousand and one questions and comments of children all the world over; till I learn to know

the trick of each voice and the sound of each footstep, and the tone in which each calls "mother." The life is like that of any woman of the working classes and presents very similar problems each day.

How to make ends meet, how best to provide liberally and yet economically for the wants of the children, how to make their work and life educative to them, how in the rush of many prosaic duties, amid so many anxieties and cares concerning what they shall eat and drink and wherewithal they shall be clothed to leave room in their lives for beauty and development, for the joy and fulness of life, for the joy that creates reverence and the activity that springs from the desire of service. These questions are no trivial ones. The decorations of a cottage room by a child with Christmas greenery may seem insignificant and the way in which a frock is mended by little fingers not very important, but if there is any ennobling influence, creative work, in art, surely it is only as far as it exists not for the satiety of the few, but for the humanizing of all, and, again, faithful work is service rendered to humanity.

Oh! that we could teach the children to feel joy in their work. Oh! that men would create art only with delight and perform service only with love. Then should we have simplicity without savagery, and beauty without luxury, and industry without materialism, and human life at its best.

And perhaps to some of these children are revealed things hidden from the wise. For, in spite of the past histories of many of them, the tone among the village girls is one of kindness to all and tenderness towards the little ones. They work cheerfully, particularly when they have any errand or service to do for "mother," and their play is hearty and good-tempered. No wealthy and petted children could have entered more heartily into the spirit of Christmas. From the early hours of Christmas morning when mysterious shapes could be felt in the dangling stocking at the head of each bed till the evening hours when, tired at last with the hearty romping, they one and all thanked "mother" for their happy day as she tucked them up, wishing them Good-night, all was sunny happiness.

Father Christmas visits us before dinner and warms his hands over our cheerful fire while the little ones stroke furtively at the end of his long white beard, and even some of

the "grown-ups" feel as if they have gone back for one day to the dream fairyland of childhood, as he hitches the great sack off his back and gives something from it to everyone in turn. For several weeks afterwards the great day and its doings form the subject of evening hour reminiscences till the holiday time has fled and school satchels have to be brought again from their hiding places into the light of day.

And then my sojourning with the bairns is ended also and the last good-byes said, and many promises made about coming to see them "ever so soon."

And I leave them, half sadly, for I have learned to love them, and half gladly, having learned from them much of the livableness of life.

And missing my little family many days afterwards, and thinking of them, and wondering in my heart whether all is well with them, I needs must write of them even while fearing to weary you—unless, indeed, some child lovers among our association of child lovers would care some day to go and spend such happy days as I have spent among the children of Ilford village.